



Food



Culture



Health

Rediscovering Traditional Tohono O'odham Foodways

Who are the Tohono O'odham?

The Tohono O'odham (toh HOH noh AH ah tahm) are a group of Native Americans who have lived in the Sonoran Desert for a very long time.

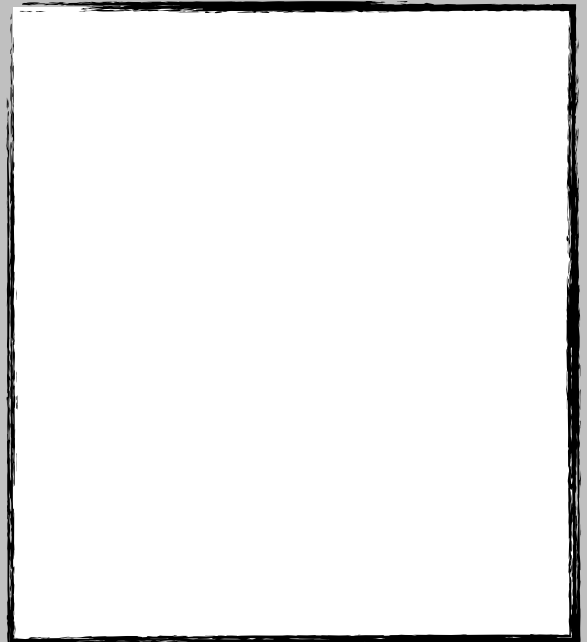
Their name means Desert People.



Have you ever been to the Sonoran Desert?

If you live in or near Tucson, then you live in the Sonoran Desert!

Draw a picture of you in the desert:



Living in the desert

The Sonoran Desert is a very dry and hot place, but it is full of life and food, if you know where to look. The O'odham are experts at living in the Sonoran Desert.



Would you know where to get food and water from the Sonoran Desert?

Where does your food come from?



Traditional Foodways

The Tohono O'odham lived in the desert for hundreds of years without electricity or grocery stores. They got their food from the desert in three ways. They farmed the land, they harvested wild food, and they hunted wild animals.

Farming the desert

Using the flood waters that came with the summer monsoons, thousands of acres were planted with nutritious crops that were well-adapted to the short, hot growing season.



Ak-chin (monsoon flood plain) farming during summer and winter rains enabled farmers to plant and harvest year-round. Here a Tohono O'odham farmer channels water to the village field.

Is farming easy or hard work?

What does a farmer do?

Has someone you know ever had a garden?

Many of these foods were eaten fresh. Some food was preserved for use throughout the rest of the year. These crops included tepary beans, 60-day corn and O'odham squash.



tepary beans - yum!

Harvesting Wild Food

Throughout the seasons of the year, the Sonoran Desert provided a wide variety of wild foods. Wild foods are things like fruit, seeds, flowers and beans that desert plants produce on their own. The Tohono O'odham collected, preserved and stored desert produce. Harvested plants included **cholla buds**, **saguaro fruit**, **mesquite bean pods and beans**.

Can you match these foods names with the correct photos?

Do you think finding wild food is easy or hard work?

Where do you get your vegetables?



Hunting in the desert

The animals of the desert also provided an important source of nutrition for the O'odham. The People hunted rabbits, deer, javalina and other creatures.

Do you think hunting animals is easy or hard work?

How would you catch one of these animals?

Where does the meat that you eat come from?



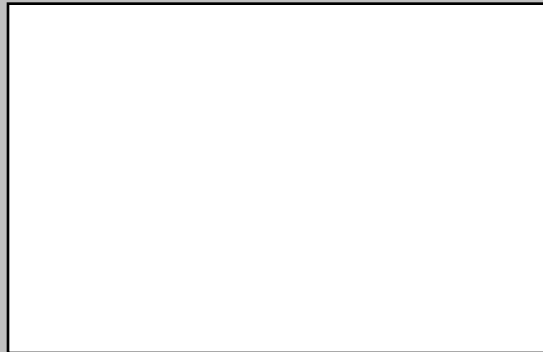
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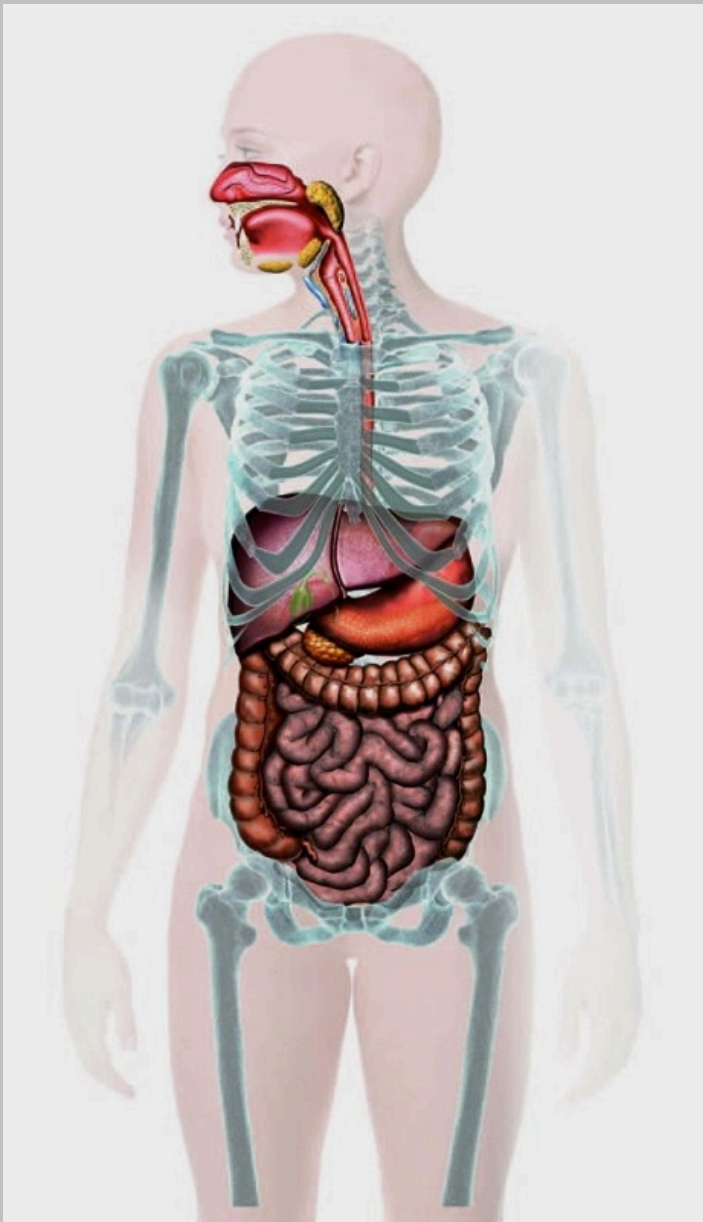
Draw a picture of another desert creature that would be good to eat!

What makes these foods so special?

The farmed, hunted and harvested foods were all that the Tohono O'odham people ate for a very long time. Their bodies got to be very good at using only the natural foods from the Sonoran Desert.

The desert can cure

The desert food helped to protect people from sickness and disease. Here are a few of the health benefits of the traditional O'odham food:



The **tepary beans** are high in protein, minerals and fiber. Eating tepary beans helps to control cholesterol and diabetes because they help prevent a rapid rise of sugar in the blood after eating. The protein helps to build muscles.

Color in red the parts in the body that contain muscles.

Mesquite seed pods are high in carbohydrates and fiber. Foods with carbohydrates give you energy. Foods with fiber help with digestion.

Color in blue part of the body where digestion takes place.

Cholla buds are high in calcium which is important for strong teeth and bones. Cholla buds also have fiber that regulates blood sugar.

Color in yellow the parts of the body that contain teeth and bones.

These foods take a long time to digest, which means you don't feel hungry in between meals, which means you don't want to eat very much.

How much of your body is affected by the foods you eat?

Does living in the desert seem like a lot of work?

If you said yes, you're right! It was a lot of work!

In order to get food from the desert, O'odham men, women and children had to move their bodies every day, all day. This was the life they were used to. This was the life that kept them healthy and their bodies strong.



Juanita Ahill crushing mesquite beans.

The O'odham used their knowledge of the Sonoran Desert to keep themselves healthy and safe. They made ceremonies and celebrations to help them live in this difficult environment for many, many years before there was electricity, hospitals, computers or fast food restaurants.

Does this way of life seem very different from the way you live?

If you said yes, you're probably right! Most people today go to grocery stores to get food. We don't have to use our bodies very much in order to survive. We don't have to be afraid of the dangers outside.

Today, the Tohono O'odham still live in the desert. Like most people today who live in and around Tucson, their houses have cool air, they drive cars, they shop at the mall and they like to eat at restaurants. They watch TV and play video games.

Do you like to do any of those things?

Life is a lot easier now for the O'odham. *But does having an easier life mean that you have a better life? Are there any dangers in living an easy life?*

Let's look at some of the changes that took place on O'odham land to see if the easier life today has led to a better life.



The World Had Changed

New People Came to the Sonoran Desert

In 1692 Spanish priests and soldiers came to live among the Tohono O'odham. They brought new foods with them such as wheat for making bread, cattle for beef, many different kinds of fruit trees and sugar.

More and more land was used to grow these foods instead of the traditional O'odham crops. The Spanish wanted the O'odham to farm in a different way than they were used to. The Spanish expected the O'odham to work with their new crops, which meant they had to stay in one place. Fewer O'odham practiced traditional ak-chin farming.



A depiction of the Spanish priest Padre Eusebio Kino

More People, More Farms

As the years passed, other people came to live in the area. They wanted to use the desert water for their farms. They dug ditches from the small Santa Cruz River to get the water to their crops.

The rushing water from violent summer storms and floods dug out the soil, which made these new ditches become very, very deep. Now the water went to the bottom of a deep ditch. It could no longer water the O'odhams' farms or anyone else's.



The channel became very deep by 1912. Photo courtesy of the Arizona Historical Society/Tucson #140503b

The new people had money to dig wells to pump water from underground. The O'odham had to depend on the government to dig their wells for their water. But, the well pumps often broke or the wells were not in the right places to be useful.

Because of these big changes to the land and water, the O'odham couldn't grow their own food. They became dependent on the United States government for their food. This food was not good for their health.

Cultural Changes

Another big change was that the government wanted O'odham children to learn English. The best way to do this, they thought, was to make the children leave their families and live in boarding schools that were far away.

Because they were away from their families, the children didn't learn their language or cultural traditions. They didn't learn the important skills they needed to know in order to farm and harvest the desert.



Although the boys in this historic photo of an Indian boarding school are not O'odham, they represent the generations of Native children who were taken away to boarding schools.

Write a paragraph about how you would feel if you were taken away from your family and forced to learn a new language and way of living:

Big changes brought new dangers

These big changes had a big effect on the health of the O'odham. Their food no longer came from the desert. They didn't have to work so hard to get their food anymore. They didn't have to use their bodies to dig up the land or to walk far everyday to get water.



Their bodies that were once fed by the highly nutritious natural food of the desert were now experiencing food that contained fat and sugar and chemicals.

The new food was easy to get and there was a lot of it, but their bodies were not used to this new kind of food. The new food was making the people gain a lot of weight. Now many O'odham are getting sick from the food they eat.

Look at what these children are doing. Is there anything dangerous about this activity?

An unseen danger

The O'odham are getting sick with a serious disease that almost none of the people had fifty years ago. Today, almost fifty percent of O'odham people who are over 35 years old develops this disease. This is the highest rate in the world!

The disease is called **diabetes**. It is a serious illness that comes from having too much sugar in the blood. Diabetes can cause serious, long-term health problems. For example, diabetes can cause kidney failure, loss of eyesight, blood circulation problems. People often die from diabetes at an early age.

If nothing is done to stop the spread of diabetes, many O'odham will die early and their quality of life will not be very good.

Do you know anyone who has diabetes?

Using the past to help the future

Rediscovering traditional foods

Today, many O'odham people understand that in order to be healthy, they have to return to the heritage of health of their ancestors.

Many Tohono O'odham are figuring out ways to become physically and culturally strong again.

More people are adding traditional foods to their meals. Young people are learning how to find and prepare these nutritious desert foods.



They are also learning new ways of cooking to make the food extra delicious!



A meal featuring traditional food from the Desert Rain Cafe in Sells, AZ

There are restaurants, festivals and new cookbooks that celebrate traditional foods.

A return to a traditional diet would be a big step in solving the major health problems of obesity and diabetes.

Healthy living by practicing culture



Young dancers from Santa Rosa



People taking part in a round dance



Playing 'toka' is great exercise!

Tohono O'odham people are returning to cultural traditions such as ceremonies, songs and games as a way to become physically active and to reconnect with the natural cycles of the desert.

With these activities, in addition to those shared with the broader society - such as basketball, soccer, skateboarding - they are charting a healthier future for their community.



Young adults spin to stay fit



Danny Lopez, a Tohono O'odham elder, demonstrates to a new generation how to sing and pray when planting



A bounty of O'odham squash

All of these activities complete the cycle of the traditional food system, which makes for healthy people!

What can you do to be healthy?



A lesson in gathering cholla buds



The start of another growing season on Tohono O'odham land

Credits:

This booklet was produced in association with the *Through the Eyes of the Eagle: Illustrating Healthy Living* exhibit at the Arizona State Museum, University of Arizona, October - December 2011, and materials from the Tohono O'odham Community Action.

Adapted by Annamarie Schaecher, Arizona State Museum

Tohono O'odham Community Action is a community-based organization dedicated to creating a healthy, sustainable and culturally-vital community on the Tohono O'odham Nation. Visit their website at www.tocaonline.org.

The Arizona State Museum promotes understanding of and respect for the peoples and cultures of Arizona and surrounding regions through research, stewardship of collections, and public outreach. Visit the website at www.statemuseum.arizona.edu

Sources: Reader, Tristan. 2010. *The Traditional Tohono O'odham Food System: A Short History*. Tohono O'odham Community Action website: Sells, AZ. Accessed on September 14, 2011 URL: < <http://www.tocaonline.org> >.

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